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ABSTRACT

This paper explores a writing-classroom pedagogy that uses dramatic literature and racially reversed roles as a springboard for discussion of diversity issues. According to the paper, the belief is that providing students with a drama that features ethnically reversed casts, performed sequentially, would allow them to recognize how powerfully skin color affects the representation of ethnic difference, race, and class. The paper's author/educators co-wrote a 3-act drama, "Room 1222," which explores issues of black-white relationships, the tensions involved in the intersection of work and family, and human behavior in the face of serious illness. The paper explains that the play was performed twice with two casts for the same audience (an ethnically diverse group of 175 students, faculty, and visitors at Loyola Marymount University)--the races of the lead characters were reversed: white became black, black became white, and there were also two directors, one black and one white. It describes the play and discusses reaction to it. Contains a 7-item bibliography. Attached is an outline of the play's two versions. (NKA)

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Racially Reversed Roles and Their Impact on Drama and Audience in the Multiethnic Writing Classroom

By Linda Bannister and James Hurd

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Racially Reversed Roles and Their Impact on Drama and Audience in the Multiethnic Writing Classroom
Linda Bannister and James Hurd
CCCC 2003
New York City, NY
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Thank you for inviting us to participate in CCCC 2003. Our paper explores a writing-classroom pedagogy that uses dramatic literature and racially-reversed roles as a springboard for discussion of diversity issues. We believe that providing students with a drama that features ethnically reversed casts, performed sequentially, would allow them to recognize how powerfully skin color affects the representation of ethnic difference, race, and class. Because we live in a society that, true or not, largely believes itself to be beyond racism and classism, it is sometimes difficult for students to become aware of or acknowledge that their perceptions and behavior *are* sometimes race and class conscious. No matter how often racism and classism are raised as issues for discussion in a university setting it is easy for students (and people in general) to dismiss them as extant in society. Racism and classism are in the domain of "the other"—most often **others** possess them, experience them or enact them. ***We*** do not.

The three-act drama, "Room 1222," which we co-authored last year, was first performed in the spring of 2002 for an ethnically diverse audience of 175 students, faculty and visitors at Loyola Marymount University. Our play explores issues of black-white relationships, the tensions involved in the intersection of work and family, and human behavior in the face of serious illness. We ran the play twice with two casts for the same audience, reversing the races of the lead characters: white became black and black became white. There were also two directors, one black and one white. A

discussion was held immediately following the performances to explore how the color change affected the relationship between the two male lead characters, E.J. and Anthony, and how the audience response was altered by the race reversal. All the actors, the directors, and the playwrights participated in the audience discussion.

The play is set in "Room 1222" of a modern-day, big-city hospital. In the first version, E.J., one of the patients in the room, is an older white man from the south, a working class carpenter in the advanced stages of emphysema. Anthony, the other patient in Room 1222, is a middle-aged black man, also from the rural south, who is now a high-powered advertising executive, very recently diagnosed with the same disease. E.J. has worked hard all his life, but has never realized the dreams he had of a home and family. In his 60's, he now faces death essentially alone. Anthony grew up with strong family ties, but has abandoned them, seeing his career and financial success as the true measure of his worth in what is still a white man's world.

The conflicts in the play arise through the growing relationship between the older man and the younger. The desire E.J. has to make a connection ***with*** (and a contribution ***to***) Anthony before EJ dies is a powerful motivating force, matched by Anthony's discomfort at seeing a reflection of himself and his future in E.J. Some obvious and some subtler differences occur when the races in this already charged relationship are reversed. The characters as perceived by the actors, as well as the audience's response to the reversed race cast ***and*** characters, are perhaps best discussed in light of excerpts from the actual performances, which we're about to show you now.

In brief, we'd argue that skin color played a powerful role in the perception and representation of ethnic difference. Skin color was a determining factor in how relationship was built between the two characters. The actors ***and*** the audience both perceived the power structures between the members of the two casts very differently. As psychologist Mark Snyder demonstrates in his article "Self-fulfilling Stereotypes," in interracial encounters, racial stereotypes may "constrain behavior in ways to cause both Blacks and Whites to behave in accordance with those stereotypes" (1982). Skin color largely determined how the actors perceived and portrayed the personal and cultural identities of their characters, though arguably class played a role as well.

One more note: writer James Hurd also played Anthony in Version One of the play and directed this videotaping. You'll also note that some dialog changes were made in keeping with the ethnicity of the characters.

Show Video

When James and I were writing the early drafts of "Room 1222" we conceived of the play as an exploration of didactic relationships-- what enables someone to learn or not learn from another person. Pedagogical research supports the notion that age, gender, race, and class are powerful influences on how easily and successfully learning takes place. For example, Lisa Delpit in her book Other People's Children (1995), details how difficult interracial student-teacher relationships can be. We knew Anthony, who was a younger Black man, would respond to older, less accomplished, White EJ in very particular ways and vice-versa. But characters have a way of disrupting their author's plans, and a play can take on life of its own. Our original Black Anthony was intended to be a sympathetic tragic hero who fought his own redemption until the very

end, and our White EJ was a sage counselor who had failed at those things now most important to him at the end of his life. Two men with much in common, but separated by skin color, and time, and circumstance. Each character could learn from the other, if the barriers could be dissolved. Though one man's life was ending, the other's could be enriched.

It occurred to us long after this first version was drafted that reversing the races of the two major characters might foreground how people learn differently when the skin color of their "teacher" changes. In order to show you, economically, how our actors and audience responded to the color change, we've prepared this one page synoptic or chart. We've used paraphrases of actual audience comments about the performance to generate the descriptions. In other words, our synoptic looks at the actor responses or interpretations of each character in both his Black and White incarnations. And then we summarize the audience responses to each set, Black and White, of Anthonys and EJs.

The audience (and the actor) saw White EJ as a gregarious character whose wisdom belies his self-deprecating humor. He openly challenges Anthony, seemingly because he cares about him, even as a father would care for a son. White E.J. comes across as a man who has accepted his fate, but still finds pleasure and meaning in life, and in the possibility of helping others. Black EJ was perceived by the audience as a slower, softer persona; he slumps more, makes less eye contact, and although Anthony's resistance affects him, he is much more tentative with him. Debilitated by disappointment and disease, Black EJ tries to break through Anthony's exterior, but is less forceful and less passionate in his attempt. He doesn't push the lesson on Anthony as White E.J. does.

Black Anthony and White Anthony are two very ***differently*** powerful men. Black Anthony is demanding, even obnoxiously assertive, quick to anger, easily offended. He is, most importantly, a Black man trying to succeed in a hostile world. He wears his color boldly, but he is also painfully alienated and fears failure. White Anthony is more relaxed and subdued, quieter in his power. He displays little open antagonism, but rather boredom with E.J.'s urgings and probings. As audience member Erica Adelstein put it, "(White Anthony) is less daunted by challenges, while Black Anthony has to maintain his intensity in order to overcome a world of obstacles."

White EJ and White Anthony aren't engaged in a struggle for power; they take it for granted. Black Anthony wears Armani and has an advanced degree, yet he constantly fights to assert his superiority over countrified E.J. White Anthony readily assumes a dominant position over EJ; and struggles only against his class and the opinions other whites may have of him. Black EJ offers help to White Anthony, but from a position of less authority and more humility. E.J. cannot connect with him, and White Anthony learns little from this teacher; he doesn't have to. As Ms. Adelstein goes on to say, "White EJ and Anthony, despite their economic differences, both come from a socially dominant ethnic group that has never suffered marginalization, and this seems to give the White men confidence of their own power in relationships. The Black men come from an oppressed ethnic group that must assert itself in society. ...The microcosm of this hospital room can tell us something about racial tension in our own world."

Black EJ sees White Anthony as someone who can make the connections he could not. White EJ sees Black Anthony as someone whose extreme work ethic and

color consciousness have blinded him to human connection. White EJ begs Black Anthony only to "connect, " but fears it may be too late to reach him. In both relationships, race is unquestionably influential. Reversing the races helps bring into sharp relief the contrast between what we ***can*** and ***will*** learn from each other. Reverse race casting is a dramatic exercise to be sure, but it is also a way to help our students and our audiences consider how their sometimes unconscious or unexpressed racism orchestrates their response to others and affects their willingness to be taught.

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Racially Reversed Roles and Their Impact on Drama and Audience in the Multiethnic Writing Classroom

Linda Bannister and James Hurd

CCCC 2003
New York City, NY
March 21, 2003

"Room 1222:" A Drama in Three Acts
A Race and Racism Synoptic*

*A chart or table furnishing a general view or forming a synopsis.

Room 1222: Version One	Room 1222: Version Two
Characters E.J.: **White**, 60-ish, blue-collar, southern man, hospitalized with advanced emphysema Anthony: **Black**, 40-ish, white collar, southern man, hospitalized with beginning stages of emphysema	Characters E.J.: **Black**, 60-ish, blue collar, southern man, hospitalized with advanced emphysema Anthony: **White**, 40-ish, white collar, southern man, hospitalized with beginning stages of emphysema

Actor Response — Anthony

White — More subdued, controlled, less angered by E.J., focused on work, takes his superiority for granted though he doubts his class, more bored.

Black — More dynamic, more forceful, quicker to anger, more self-righteous, more arrogant, more self-confident, more racially motivated, more focused on position, more ambivalent about his past.

Audience Response — Anthony

White — More professional, more restrained, more motivated by class, more dismissive of E.J., more workaholic.

Black — More domineering, more angry, more in denial, more racially motivated, more hypocritical, less caring, colder, more cynical, more a Black Panther type.

Actor Response — E.J.

White — More forceful, more powerful, desperate to reach Anthony, sees Anthony as surrogate E.J. or a son.

Black — More subdued, less powerful, less desperate, less investment in Anthony, sees him as a misguided youth, blinded by money.

Audience Response — E.J.

White — More likeable, more reliable sage, a father figure, trying to help Anthony as a substitute child.

Black — More introverted, more self-involved, less credible a sage, less powerful, more distant from Anthony.

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